THE BRITISH COLUMBIA TASK FORCE ON FAMILY VIOLENCE

BACKGROUNDER

92-03828/

HIGHLIGHTS

The report of the Task Force on Family Violence -- **Is Anyone Listening?** -- asks the government to respond *now* to the funding crisis in support services for victims of family and sexual violence. Women and children are in desperate need of safe places within their communities to begin to heal from the horrors of incest, rape, battering, emotional abuse and deliberate neglect.

Awareness of the need for coordinated intervention and prevention *as a priority of government* has at last reached the public agenda. But that awareness has not yet translated into adequate funding. Communities are unable to cope with ever-growing demands for counselling and other vital services for victims of family and sexual violence. There is an urgent need for more and better front-line services, more and better treatment programs for offenders, more and better prevention strategies.

There is no justification for further study and further delay. Task Force members believe that the people of British Columbia are prepared to say "no" to violence against women and children.

We ask the government to demonstrate that it is listening by making a significant reallocation of funds to programs and services addressing family and sexual violence. We also ask the government to implement our recommendations for constructing new working partnerships between ministries and front-line community workers, and between government and representatives of groups who face particular risk of family and sexual violence or who are particularly discriminated against by our society.

Key building blocks in a three-year plan of action include:

- an immediate increase in funding to community-based services to meet the full range of needs of victims of family and sexual violence;

- an immediate increase in funding for direct services to aboriginal families who are suffering the effects of family and sexual violence, recognizing that aboriginal people will decide themselves on the most needed services and the best ways to provide resources within the cultural traditions and holistic values of aboriginal communities;

- the introduction of prevention and early intervention as a goal of all programs which may serve family or sexual violence victims and offenders, or those at risk;

- a commitment to ensuring that mainstream services are made sensitive and accessible to the needs of aboriginal people;

- a commitment to ensuring that all services are made sensitive and accessible to those who are particularly discriminated against -- immigrants, people of colour, elderly people, people with disabilities, lesbians and gay men, people who are poor, and people living in isolated areas;

- ongoing participation of front-line community workers at all stages of planning, development, implementation and evaluation of programs and services to address family and sexual violence;

- ongoing participation in decision-making by representatives of groups who are particularly discriminated against;

- adequate training for people working with victims or offenders, some portion of the training to be provided by front-line community workers;

- funding of long-range prevention strategies to address fundamental attitudes and values that minimize the abuse of women, children and vulnerable adults.

BACKGROUND

The Task Force on Family Violence was established by Carol Gran, then Minister of Women's Programs and Government Services and Minister Responsible for Families, on March 8, 1991. The Task Force was formed as a result of consultation with women across the province; the report of the Advisory Council on Community-Based Services for Women, which identified family and sexual violence as major concerns; and the public reaction to last year's awareness campaign on wife assault.

A questionnaire developed by the Task Force was mailed to more than 1000 agencies and individuals throughout the province. In addition, the Task Force heard presentations from a wide range of individuals and organizations with particular concerns about family and sexual violence. The 13 members of the panel, chaired by Immigrant and Visible Minority Women of B.C. founding president Mobina Jaffer, drew on their backgrounds as workers in all areas of family and sexual violence, as well as the insights gleaned from broad consultation. Regrettably, the aboriginal member of the Task Force, Sharlene Frank, resigned in January, 1992, as the result of disagreement with other members over the presentation of aboriginal issues and recommendations. Her parallel report, *Family Violence in Aboriginal Communities: A First Nations Report*, has been received by government. The Task Force hopes for an early response by government to the recommendations put forward in that report.

While the Task Force accepted the broad mandate of addressing family and sexual violence, members would have preferred a gender-specific approach with a focus on violence against women. The reality is that the overwhelming majority of victims of family and sexual violence are women and children; their abusers are nearly always men.

Is Anyone Listening? continues the work of the social movement started more than 20 years ago in Canada by women who began to recognize and name family and sexual violence. As women began to disclose the terrors of incest, rape, and assault, these early feminists began to make connections between violence against women, children and vulnerable adults and the basic attitudes and patriarchal structures that shape society. A comprehensive review of the situation in British Columbia, the Task Force report reflects the nature of family and sexual violence as an expression of unequal power relationships. The voices of people working in victim support programs and prevention services echo throughout the analysis and recommendations of the Task Force.

Is Anyone Listening? assigns top priority to the need for victim-centred services that mirror the diversity of communities across the province. Task Force members also focused on the construction of new models for prevention and intervention in several key areas. Fifty detailed recommendations are presented -- all reflecting the fundamental belief that the needs of abused women and children and those adults most vulnerable to violence, including elderly people and people with disabilities, must drive the responses coordinated by government.

It is vital that the government hear and heed the experiences of front-line workers in the fields of family and sexual violence. And there must be acknowledgement of the need for ongoing advocacy for victims and people at risk. Advocacy, with its goal of empowering victims of family and sexual violence to help themselves, must be seen as a basic prerequisite of social change.

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

> *In a study of young men at York University, a third said they would rape under certain circumstances, while a sixth said that the best way to sexually excite a "cold" woman was to use a little violence.*
>
> **Battered Women's Support Services Dating Violence Coordinator Presentation to the Task Force**

All forms of family and sexual violence against women are linked with women's unequal status in society. Despite some progress in breaking down rigid sex-role stereotypes, children grow up in a climate that continues to deliver the message that boys are more important than girls -- and, therefore, entitled to get what they want, even if that means taking power by force. Despite the lip service paid to intolerance of violence against women, the objectification of women is glorified in "popular" culture.

From the bedroom to the boardroom, the social and cultural milieu has historically extended unwritten privileges to men, including licence to control women. That licence underscores the continuum of family and sexual violence, and translates into male behaviours ranging from subtle persuasion to the most overt expressions of power: rape, wife assault and murder.

There has been significant progress in the past decade in society's awareness of family and sexual violence. Still, much remains the same: victims are often disbelieved or blamed for "provoking" the violence; women face tremendous economic, social and emotional pressures to stay in abusive relationships; many communities offer few or no resources to help abused women and their children put their lives back together, or to guarantee their safety.

Every woman knows first-hand the fear of being sexually assaulted. Based on national statistics, an estimated 171,000 adult women in British Columbia have been or will be sexually assaulted at some time in their lives. Support for criminal justice intervention in wife assault and sexual assault cases continues to increase, within both the justice system and the general public. However, policies and coordinated responses developed since 1983 are still inadequate and unevenly implemented across the province.

The more we expose the reality of violence against women, the more we learn about the secrets that haunt generations of women. The 1980s and 1990s unleashed a flood of disclosures of childhood abuse by adults who had long been silenced by society's almost universal denial of the scope of family and sexual violence.

British Columbians are coming forward in unprecedented numbers to ask for the help they need to deal with the trauma of childhood sexual abuse. New policies and programs have been developed to assist victims and self-help groups have been established. Yet many adult survivors of child sexual abuse are being turned away, added to waiting lists for counselling that are months, even years, long.

Numerous recommendations by the Task Force address the immediate and long-term needs of abused women, as well as the need for more and better treatment programs for offenders.

CHILD ABUSE

Like other forms of family and sexual violence, abusing children is an abuse of power. To a great extent, concerns about child sexual abuse have eclipsed the focus on physical abuse and neglect of children. The Task Force heard many times that these remain urgent issues for children and families in British Columbia.

The "discovery" in the 1980s of the magnitude and horror of child sexual abuse stunned the Canadian public. One of the strongest taboos on public examination of the private realm of family life was broken by media reports of cases of girls and boys being sexually abused in their homes, in schools, and in religious institutions. Shocking stories of multiple abuse over years, often by men trusted in their communities, have become commonplace.

The majority of children who are sexually abused are girls, but many are boys. There are too few resources in British Columbia to even properly identify families at high risk of child abuse, let alone provide prevention and early intervention programs and long-term counselling.

The province has initiated a comprehensive review of major legislation affecting children and families in British Columbia, with a completion date of 1993. Enhancement of the current inter-ministerial approach to services for abused children is recommended.

The Task Force also recommends expanded consultation with the community, in keeping with the approach the Ministry of Social Services has adopted toward legislative review.

The government is urged to proceed with implementation of the recommendations of several major reports already produced, which have direct relevance to laws, policies, programs and services concerning child abuse in British Columbia. These include the federal Rix Rogers Report, *Reaching for Solutions;* the Provincial Ombudsman's Report, *Public Services to Children, Youth and their Families in British Columbia;* the Ministry of Health report, *Dimensions of Multiple Victim Child Sexual Abuse in British Columbia, 1985-1989;* and *Children and Youth at Risk: Towards a Mental Health Plan for Metropolitan Vancouver.*

VULNERABLE ADULTS

We do not know how many older people in British Columbia are being abused by family members or by caregivers. The only national survey on abuse of elderly people estimates that 53 of every 1,000 elderly persons in private homes in British Columbia are abused, the highest reported rate in Canada.

A significant number of adults are mistreated because they are ill, frail, isolated or dependent on others for care. People with disabilities are extremely vulnerable to all forms of violence. A survey by DAWN Canada of 245 women with disabilities found that 40 per cent had been raped, abused or assaulted. Violence or the fear of violence were cited as the women's overriding concerns.

At both the national and provincial levels, there is a serious lack of data on the incidence of abuse of people with physical or psychological disabilities. There are virtually no specific policies regarding the abuse of people with disabilities. There are no counselling services, no transition houses, no sexual assault centres, and no victim support services which are designed for people with disabilities who have been physically or sexually abused.

The Task Force recommends that all sexual assault, victim assistance and transition house services in British Columbia be made accessible to people with disabilities within three years.

ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES

The Task Force began its work with one aboriginal member. At the outset it was agreed that solutions to problems of family and sexual violence in aboriginal communities lay with aboriginal people. However, when it came time to write the report of the Task Force, disagreement arose over how best to present recommendations that address aboriginal issues. Non-aboriginal members believed that issues of concern to aboriginal communities must, in addition to being discussed in a separate chapter, be highlighted throughout the report and in the set of recommendations. It was felt that it would marginalize aboriginal issues to have aboriginal people represented only in a separate chapter with their own recommendations, as proposed by the aboriginal member. Unfortunately, we were unsuccessful in resolving these different perspectives.

In keeping with members' belief that we cannot speak for aboriginal people, the Task Force chapter on family and sexual violence in aboriginal issues is intended to serve as a vehicle for aboriginal people to speak for themselves.

> *No matter what the culture or heritage, we women are human and we deserve the safety and respect inherent in a just, caring and equal society. Family violence is not traditional. Assaulting women is not appropriate. Culturally or otherwise.*
>
> **Ardyth Cooper, aboriginal consultant**
> **Presentation to the Task Force**

While aboriginal communities in British Columbia have much in common, they are also extremely diverse. Some 42,000 people live on reserves in 350 communities, and at least twice that number live off reserve in towns and cities of all sizes. There are 196 bands, 33 tribal councils and ten major language groups among the aboriginal people in the province.

Research shows that aboriginal women face even higher risks than non-aboriginal women in British Columbia of suffering some form of family violence. The aboriginal tradition of interwoven kinship networks -- the source of individual identity, love and protection in healthy communities -- has been under tremendous strain because of colonization and oppression. Many aboriginal communities are in socio-economic crisis, manifested in distressingly high rates of suicide, unemployment, ill-health, substance abuse, and family and sexual violence.

Close-knit kinship networks can support aboriginal women and children, but can also impose silence when behaviour within the family is abusive. Aboriginal women are understandably afraid to look for protection and intervention from non-aboriginal services, given their people's experiences with racism at the hands of the child welfare system, the criminal justice system, and residential schools.

Few mainstream services provide aboriginal staff, volunteer participation, or programs designed by and for aboriginal people. Aboriginal victims of family and sexual violence are frustrated by a lack of options and an equally serious lack of coordinated services. Confusion in the division of responsibilities between the federal and provincial governments compounds the problem.

It is aboriginal people who must find solutions that respect traditional holistic values and meet the needs of both victims and communities. At the same time, it is the position of the Task Force that aboriginal people must have a choice between programs and services which are designed and controlled specifically by and for aboriginal people, and mainstream services which are sensitive to their needs and truly accessible to them.

BLUEPRINT FOR ACTION

Recognizing the urgent need for fundamental social change to protect women, children and other vulnerable adults from family and sexual violence, **Is Anyone Listening?** presents a comprehensive three-year plan that embraces the vision of those who know best: front-line workers from across the province.

Immediate action is needed to help heal the human suffering caused by family and sexual violence. To that end, the Task Force report charts new directions for a coordinated government response, including a fundamental realignment of the decision-making process to guarantee wider community consultation and participation.

To assist with the shift towards an inclusive and integrated approach, the Task Force asks that the government establish "inter-ministry responsibility centres" to coordinate initiatives at senior levels, and fund "inter-agency committees" at the local level.

Priorities in Year One tackle the severe problem of understaffed and underfunded community-based services, as well as the need for enhanced training and prevention education. Recommendations include asking the government to:

- increase funding to transition and second-stage houses, sexual assault centres, specialized victim assistance programs and other community agencies providing services to victims of family and sexual violence;

- immediately increase funding for direct services to aboriginal people, using service delivery models or guidelines currently being developed through the Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs;

- include prevention and early intervention as a goal of all programs that may serve family violence victims and offenders, or those at risk;

- ensure that all victim support services are accessible and hospitable to people who face particular discrimination in our society;

- encourage and fund the development, implementation and evaluation of models for protecting assaulted women and their children, and for addressing the needs of women and children in custody and access disputes involving violence;

- provide specialized Crown counsel to prosecute cases relating to violence against women;

- provide funding to women's centres, in their role as local agencies offering prevention education, early intervention and support to women who are victims of violence or at risk;

- develop a comprehensive response to existing major reports on child abuse in British Columbia;

- increase funding for treatment of abusive men and sex offenders;

- address the need to adequately train all those working with family and sexual violence victims or offenders, including ministry staff, police, teachers, physicians, judges, and staff and volunteers of government-funded community agencies and immigrant orientation centres.

Other Year One recommendations focus on related issues of inter-ministerial and inter-agency cooperation, evaluation of existing programs and services, and legislative review in the areas of criminal injury compensation, limitation on civil claims, and human rights.

Key recommendations in Years Two and Three include requests for:

- a review of contracts for transition houses, sexual assault centres and victim assistance programs to bring staff salaries up to the level of comparable workers within government;

- funding for self-help groups for victims of family and sexual violence;

- funding for strategies to link elderly people and people with disabilities into friendship, self-help and service delivery networks;

- funding to expand the pool of affordable housing so that women and their children who leave abusive relationships can meet their shelter needs;

- funding for legal information, advocacy and representation for victims of family and sexual violence.

CONCLUSION

While the Task Force acknowledges the financial constraints of these tough economic times, there is much that can and must be done even within those constraints. The social costs of violence against women and children are staggering in human suffering, in lost potential and in hard cash. It is not a question of whether we can afford to pay or not. The question is: do we pay now or do we pay later?

It is time to move beyond acknowledging the seriousness of the problem, beyond political rhetoric and behavioural theories and jurisdictional disputes. It is time for concerted action.

The Task Force mandate -- to identify and set priorities for the government response to family and sexual violence -- required members to adopt long-term perspectives that address the challenge of changing how society thinks about issues of power and inequality. At the same time, the Task Force is emphatic in calling for funding to address, *without delay*, the need for more and better coordinated front-line community services for victims of family and sexual violence.

The response of the Government of British Columbia in the coming months will determine whether, in fact, anyone *is* listening.

FAMILY AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE

THE FACTS

- 62 per cent of women murdered in Canada in 1990 died as a result of wife assault.
- on average, during 1990 in Canada two women were killed by their partners every week.
- women are 13 times more likely to be abused in their own homes than by a stranger on the street.
- one million women in Canada are abused physically by their husbands or partners every year.
- it is likely that 50,000 to 70,000 school-age children in British Columbia have witnessed violence directed against their mothers.
- it is estimated that by the first time a police report on wife assault is made, a woman has already been assaulted on average 35 times.
- in British Columbia, for every family (of a woman and her children) taken in by transition houses, two families are turned away.
- only a tiny minority of abusers attend treatment programs; estimates are that only 1 per cent of abusive men enter treatment.
- every six minutes a woman in Canada is sexually assaulted.
- every 17 minutes a woman in Canada is raped.
- it is estimated that 171,000 adult women in British Columbia have been or will be sexually assaulted at some time in their lives.
- a woman in British Columbia is more likely to be killed by her partner than by anyone else. She is more likely to be injured by her partner than she is to be injured in a car accident.
- it is estimated that only one in 10 sexual assaults is reported to the police; and only one in 100 cases of date rape is reported to the police.
- about 80 per cent of sexual assaults occur in the victim's home.

- two of every three sexual assaults are committed by offenders who are known to their victims.

- a 1990 British Columbia report on violence in aboriginal communities found that 86 per cent of respondents had experienced or witnessed family violence.

- approximately one in three aboriginal women in Canada are abused by their partners.

- there are only seven Sexual Assault Centres funded by the province; an eighth community-based centre in Vancouver receives no government funding. Typically, a staff worker with 15 years experience, or who holds a master's degree, earns between $20,000 and $35,000 a year.

- there are 48 transition houses (emergency shelters) in British Columbia and an additional 11 safe homes in rural areas. Safe homes do not offer the same range of counselling, legal and financial services as transition houses.

- there is only one second-stage transition house where women and their children in British Columbia can stay for up to a year while they get their lives together.

- the only National Survey on Abuse of the Elderly estimates that 53 of every 1,000 elderly persons in private homes in British Columbia are abused, the highest reported rate in Canada.

- a study by DAWN Canada of women with disabilities found that 53 per cent of those who had a disability from birth, and 40 per cent of women who had developed a disability later in life, had been physically or sexually assaulted.

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